

Sermons through

Romans

Living Peaceably

Romans 12:17, 18

With Study Questions

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Living Peaceably

Romans 12:17, 18

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men (Romans 12:17, 18).

Repay no one evil for evil (Romans 12:17a)

Retaliation

When in high school I was a below average player on the football team. One day during practice I was standing next to a team watching a drill when he smacked me pretty hard on the side of my helmet. Almost as part of a reflex arc I smacked him back. He was pretty upset at this action and soon we were in an altercation.

Before things escalated out of control another team mate broke in and explained that the guy I was fighting with wasn't the one who smacked me. This third fellow was the one who did it, but he wanted it to seem like the other player had committed the infraction. His little scheme worked pretty well. What was odd though was the continued tension between me and my false attacker. Something ugly had happened. We both saw a side of each other that Matthew Henry, about three hundred years earlier, called "**a brutish recompense, befitting only those animals which are not** conscious either of any being above them or any state before them."

Vindictive retaliations are the actions of a beast.

We delude ourselves into thinking we're above such carnality because we've managed to control our fists and even our tongues. We're not so juvenile to blatantly strike back! But a retaliatory spirit lingers, like a lion in the thicket waiting to pounce "**Sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it**" (Genesis 4:7).

Whether siblings or spouses or business partners or classmates, close relationships will often generate a subtle spirit of retribution-even vengeance which is noticed when a simple statement or question is posed (a question or statement, which if made by a stranger would be answered

thoughtfully and gently) but since *this* person asked or said it, it is responded to, not with mere frustration (some questions and statements can be inherently frustrating), but anger.

There is anger because they did, or are continually doing, something wrong (maybe even evil) and you've just about had it. You have a full head of steam, and now you're going to give them what's coming to them. It must be said that there is a proper and necessary means by which the evil of a person is to be addressed, but Paul is not addressing that in this passage. He is addressing a situation where someone has done something wrong, "**evil**" *kakon*, and you are tempted to allow them to be your teacher by responding with evil.

The last verse in this chapter reads:

**Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good
(Romans 12:21).**

When you view that person who has done evil with such contempt that you can barely control your tongue, when that eruption is nigh, pause and recognize at that moment that you've surely been overcome by evil. "But", you may object, "I am the victim and now you've transformed me into the perpetrator." I am not the villain! I am not the evil one!"

Three things I would like us all to consider when we find this spirit of retaliation within us:

First, we are all perpetrators. The acknowledgment of our own sinfulness so easily falls from our lips, but we are sadly lacking when it comes to grasping the depth of it and allowing that knowledge to topple the frustrations we have when others fall short at our expense. How quickly we forget the depth of our sin and the height of God's grace.

Judah, the son of Jacob, no doubt experienced this when he utilized the services of a woman of ill-repute, as recorded in Genesis 38. Three months later he was informed that a woman within his own household was with child and (at least the way it's recorded) almost without a thought or hesitancy mandated that they "Bring her out, and let her be burned."

What he didn't know was that she had proof that he was the father. When this evidence was presented to him he declared, "**She is more righteous than I**" (Genesis 38:26). She had still done what she did. The

accounts of the exploits of the patriarchs are truly weaved with darkness, sin and deception. But the one thing they didn't lose was the ability to think more highly of themselves than they ought (Romans 12:3).

Second, we are called to imitate Jesus in matters where we are offended.

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly (1 Peter 2:21-23).

Many of us have a pretty good idea of what it feels like to be reviled (*loidoroumenos*-to slander, to insult strongly) and to suffer. But there is not a person in this world who knows what it is like to experience these things with hearts that are entirely innocent-having committed no sin. Someone once quipped that we should not be too put off when people spread false rumors about us, the truth is much worse.

Peter does not leave us with the notion that Jesus merely took His medicine, grinning and bearing it for no good reason. His lack of retaliatory spirit came by entrusting Himself to him who judges justly-the knowledge that His Father in heaven will sort things out according to His wisdom and power.

Third, we are to recognize that in the final analysis, God is the one smacking our helmets. Jesus' words of boldness and comfort to the Apostles when He sent them out to the "**lost sheep of the house of Israel**" (Matthew 10:6) knowing they would be delivered to courts and flogged "**in their synagogues**" (Matthew 10:17) was that they should have no fear because the sparrow "**will not fall to the ground apart from your Father**" (Matthew 10:29).

But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows (Matthew 10:30, 31).

I have a relative in law enforcement. He shared that they instruct

potential officers, when confronted with a volatile situation—a situation where they might be tempted to lash out, to empty the canoe. I asked him what he meant by that.

He explained that if you're on a lake or river and a canoe keeps bumping into your boat, you will be tempted to anger with the person who is failing to control their canoe. But if you realize there is no one in the canoe, that it is just the tide moving an empty canoe, there is really no one to get mad at. Of course as Christians we can take it a step further. We can know that the canoe is guided by the invisible hand of our Father in heaven, **“who works all thing according to the counsel of his will” (Ephesians 1:11).**

The Apostle continues:

Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men (Romans 12:17b, 18).

God and Man

Many years ago I had a lunch meeting with some members of the church who had some theological questions. They were very spirited in their objections and so I drew the conclusion that these were the rules of engagement for the discussion. If someone elbows in a game of basketball it is not unreasonable to conclude that they must think elbowing is allowable. I was quite mistaken.

Two of the four people in this meeting were, more or less, bystanders and their evaluations were interesting. One said, “I can't believe a pastor would speak so aggressively.” The other said, “I can't believe a person would speak so rudely to a pastor.” This was an early and valuable lesson in the ministry and in life. None of us have an entirely accurate read on the way we are perceived by others. And what we learn in this short phrase **“Have regard for good things in the sight of all men”** is that it matters.

I recall as a young man boldly and proudly maintaining the position that I don't care what others think, as if it was a virtue. As if I was so above such petty observations. We might see a similar disposition in something less critical such as the way we dress for church (which in Southern California is quite different than South Carolina). We say to

ourselves, “God doesn’t care about the way I dress, therefore it doesn’t matter if the way I dress offends or distracts other people.” I am not saying this to make people overly self-conscious about what they’re wearing at this moment. I am only seeking to address a disposition. The perceptions of others do matter. Addressing the church at Corinth, Paul wrote:

...for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of man (2 Corinthians 8:21).

There is no shortage of Scripture teaching this very thing. In Proverbs we read:

My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. ³ Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. ⁴ So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man (Proverbs 3:1-4).

One of the indictments against the sinful acts of David was how it would be perceived by men—even non-Christian men. Earlier in Romans Paul offers the quote from Nathan as applying not only to David but to them as well.

For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you” (Romans 2:24).

I recall when I was a youth pastor inviting a highly respected Christian teacher from South High to come and speak to our youth group. Perhaps after he saw who was sitting among our youth, he made the very disconcerting statement, “Some of you shouldn’t let others know that you’re Christians, lest you embarrass your Savior.”

The idea that ‘what people think doesn’t matter’ could not be less

biblical. In Luke's gospel, his commentary on the growth of Jesus includes the words:

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52).

I suspect that our natural resistance to the opinions of others and opting to only care what God thinks is due to what we might consider to be God's relative silence when it comes to our shortcomings. Of course God is not silent at all. He speaks to us in His word. He speaks to us providentially when we hear the counsel of others. He speaks to us by His Spirit when He convicts us of sins. When it gets right down to it the first four of the Ten Commandments (the ones which prescribe how we are to love God) though more egregious than the next six, are easier to fake.

Considering the opinions of men can get a little tricky. Two things to consider as we conclude: Glorifying God rather than self and not overly esteeming the opinions of men.

Glorify Your Father

First, our works are to glorify God. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught:

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

Yet, in the same sermon, He also taught:

Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven (Matthew 6:1).

This is a pretty tight river to paddle through. Years ago I recall a televangelist ostensibly healing people and declaring prophecies peppered with the words, "God did it." He would do this, it would seem, to fulfill the obligation to make sure everyone knew it wasn't him but only God working through Him. This ministry, like so many like it, eventually

became embroiled in scandal and controversy and this televangelist was described as a monster. All this to say that there appeared to be a great disconnect between his giving glory to God and the promotion of himself.

But to a lesser degree we can all fall into this trap. We wish to obey Jesus and provide a good example to others, not that they would admire and praise us but that their eyes might be directed to Christ. There should be a sweetness, humility, obedience and contentment in our lives that would reveal a heavenly source of such things. But there is a short journey to pride and self-adulation.

The crossing of the line here can be difficult to determine. At what point have I moved from seeking to be a good example to others and a glory to God to seeking to be admired? Sometimes it's obvious and other times not so much. And it can change in a heartbeat and at times the assessments of others regarding what is happening in your heart can be wrong. One pretty accurate measurement is to examine whether or not all of your godly works are public and involve the **"sound of a trumpet"** (Matthew 6:2) and there is nothing done **"in secret...that your Father sees in secret"** (Matthew 6:4).

Opinions of Men

Finally, though the opinions of others should be thoughtfully considered in our actions, they should not be esteemed too highly. We most certainly are to seek peace with all men. But a faithful Christian must recognize that being faithful may will put you at odds with the world.

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:11, 12).

This is a pretty difficult prophecy by Christ to embrace.

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I

chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you (John 15:18, 19).

It is for this reason that Paul adds the short clause: **“if it is possible, as much as depends on you.”** If the issue in question requires you deny what you know to be good, right and true, (according to the Scriptures) you must be willing to sacrifice your popularity. It’s been said that **“it is impossible that the soldiers of Christ should have perpetual peace with the world, whose prince is Satan.”**¹

It was the Apostle’s willingness to put forth a gospel-a message of the cross that was an offense to so many that was the means by which redemption came to so many. It wasn’t always easy. His weakness in such matters is why he solicited prayer, that he might open his **“mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel”** for which he was not merely unpopular, but in chains.

Questions for Study

1. How would describe our natural reaction to retaliate? In what ways do you see this disposition in yourself (pages 2, 3)?
2. What are we overcome by when we allow this sin to prevail (page 3)?
3. What three things must we remember in order to battle the desire to get back at others (pages 3-5)?
4. Does it matter what other people think of your actions? Why or why not (pages 5-7)?
5. How does considering the opinions of others get tricky? How do we navigate through this (pages 7, 8)?
6. At what point is it not possible to be at peace with others (pages 8, 9)?

¹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 12:18). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

